"And I had the bait to do it before you interfered!"

"You are unlikely to convince me that you acted from altruism, S'Tyge."

The Romulan laughed shortly, a harsh cough that made him wince as it jarred his arm. "No. But my chances of survival with a disappointed Empire appeared to be better than as the host of the artifact. My family, also thanks to you, has become accustomed to being out of favor. I had the Speaker and enough antimatter to hold a planet to ransom."

"Did your men know what you were carrying?"

"I do not explain my actions to the rabble, Spock."

"And what would have been the role of my men in your program?"

The Romulan smiled. "I regret that they would have been expendable. Oh, your fancy boy appealed to me, but I had no use for the rest." His eyes narrowed, waiting for Spock's reaction, but the Vulcan only looked at him.

"You will not provoke me again, S'Tyge."

"Not even if I tell him what I did to you?" S'Tyge was too intent on Spock as he pressed the threat home. He failed to hear T'serek's approach, but he felt the tip of the sword under the angle of his jaw.

"If you again sully the name of my superior officer by speaking it without permission, I will cut your throat." T'serek's low voice was pitched for their ears alone, but every word was as clear and hard as ice and the sword lifted S'Tyge's chin inexorably until he jerked his head away.

"Mr. T'serek feels strongly on the subject," Spock said blandly. "Now if you have no useful information to give me and you are unable to assist us, I suggest you join the Speaker."

The Romulan turned on his heel and left Spock and T'serek facing each other. T'serek dropped the sword, and the menace melted away, but the flush of anger changed to embarrassment as Spock continued to look at him. Under stress, his accent surfaced and his sentence construction echoed the formality of his own language.

"Your pardon, sir, I--I did not mean to intrude, I--" Tongue-tied and awkward for the first time, he looked down, his lashes lying against his cheek like a child's. Some subliminal insight told Spock his own silence was inspiring this unusual behavior..

"Thank you, Mr. T'serek. What is our security status?"

That enabled the boy to make his report and take his leave, but it did nothing to relieve the tension of time which Spock was finally acknowledging as the crater shadow lengthened from wall to wall, and dusk rose about them like a tide. He had no way of knowing whether Goren's ultimatum had reached anyone with the power to do something about it--if that were the case, then the Enterprise might now be in orbit, aware of the dangers involved in communication and transportation. If not, it would soon be there, unwarned. He moved toward Clement and Nadia, who now had the circuitry of the core probe spread all over the floor. Sunderson, whom Nadia was supervising between comments to Clement, was completing a second simple device he had asked for.

"It's ready, Mr. Spock. As long as the frequency keeps sending nothing will happen. When it stops, these two circuits lock. But even here the signal is so weak--I don't understand what it's supposed to do?"

"That will become clear," said Spock, who had no intention of telling her the import of his dead man's switch. The weak signal of his transponder, implanted long ago, would continue until he died or was forcibly removed from the vicinity of the switch. By adding it to the more complex cycle he had requested the other two scientists to impose on the core probe it would provide a form of fail-safe by dropping the forcefield protecting the dome.

"What are you doing?" asked S'Tyge, bored with his pain, his inability to control Spock, and particularly with the nearness of an ignominious death.

"I am constructing a trap around my bait. Are you ready, Mr. Clement?"

"Yes, sir." Clement sounded sure of himself again. Physics dictates the form of devices which manipulate energy. Given the tools of his trade, he showed to better advantage.

"I hope the shields hold," Nadia said, but it was not the potential of the volcano she feared, and she closed the circuit with a steady hand. The result was almost instantaneous. If the earth had groaned before, it bellowed now and the floor shook under them.

"Earthquakes?" asked the Romulan.

"Seismic disturbance is to be expected during an eruption. I have removed a series of dams which were containing magma, and, near the surface, juvenile waters, near the volcano. The steam plume should be visible very soon in the upper atmosphere, and of course the magma glows in the dark. The sound comes in part from the corridors in the crater wall being filled."

"You'll get a vent right up the lift," protested the Romulan. "We'll all be parboiled."

"I anticipate that the system was created to remain functional under such circumstances. There is another possibility, however."

Nadia shivered and clenched her teeth. The Speaker looked up for the first time since their arrival even Clement looked up with his hands empty.

"When the maze fills with molten rock, it will either destroy the artifact--or drive it upward. I believe it will come here, in an attempt to stop the lava flow."

"And rip us apart as easily as it did my men."

"They did not expect it," said Spock. "We do. It has only one entrance. We will kill it if we can. If we cannot, I will drop the forcefield surrounding this installation."

S'Tyge understood him well enough. They all did now, and their glances turned outward toward the dark, to the enemy they could understand. The cavern-mouths in the crater walls were steaming now, and the lower ones, scarcely above the crater floor, were lipped first with rose-silver brightening the steam, and finally with dull orange. It hesitated, the color fluctuating, then spilled slowly forward, one, two--half a dozen rivers of sluggish, glowing, stone that cried out as the mountain had. The lights failed suddenly, and every head snapped back to the black column where the lift stood empty. That light still shone, showing them the empty walls and floor.